

Abulafia's Secrets of the Guide : A Linguistic Turn

I. BETWEEN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

The main purpose of this study is to elucidate some aspects of the relations between some writings of a mystic, Abraham Abulafia, the founder of ecstatic Kabbalah, and the medieval figure he admired most, Maimonides, the founder of Jewish Aristotelianism. This issue is to be understood as part of a much broader topic, which is fundamental for the understanding of the Jewish speculative corpora in the Middle Ages: the relation between philosophy and mysticism. As seen below, this issue has been already aborded by several scholars, one of the most eminent among them being Prof. Alexander Altmann. Therefore, before dwelling upon the details of the particular question let me survey briefly the state of the field.

The relationship between philosophy and mysticism in Judaism has been discussed several times by many scholars and thinkers. Two of them, David Neumark¹ and Franz Rosenzweig² have proposed a theory, which may be designated as the « pendulum theory », whose basic assumption is the existence of oscillations between the dominance of the speculative and the mystical in Jewish thought. The emergence of the central trend in medieval Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, is portrayed by them as a reaction to the ascent of Jewish philosophy in the form presented by Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. These authors assume that the fluctuation between speculation and mysticism is to be traced to ancient times, the medieval period being the most obvious and important episode of this ongoing oscillation. Motivated by a deep aversion toward Kabbalah, Heinrich Graetz, the most important 19th century Jewish historian, has already considered Kabbalah to be a pernicious medieval innovation, or invention, aiming to counteract the influence of the « enlightening » Aristotelianism of the « Great eagle »³. Last but not least, Gershom Scholem emphasized the importance of the encounter between

1. *Geschichte der juedischen Philosophie des Mittelalters*, Berlin, 1907, vol. I, p. 179-236.

2. *Kleinere Schriften*, Berlin, 1937, p. 531. See also my remarks on this stand of Rosenzweig's in « Franz Rosenzweig and the Kabbalah » in P. MENDES-FLOHR, ed., *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, University Press of New England, 1987, p. 168-171.

3. *Geschichte der Juden*, Leipzig, 1908, vol. VII, p. 385-402; For an adaptation of Graetz's thesis, with major changes, see my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven, London, 1988, p. 251-253; « Maimonides and Kabbalah », in I. TWERSKY (ed.), *Studies in Maimonides*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 31-33; see too Mark VERMAN, *The Book of Contemplation, Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources*, Albany, Suny, 1992, p. 20-24.

an alleged mythical Gnosticism, presumably transmitted in Jewish esoteric circles for centuries on the one hand, and the philosophical Neoplatonism as represented by the various medieval versions on the other hand, as his main phenomenological description of the emergence of Kabbalah⁴. Though Scholem did not ignore the potential impact of the controversy concerning Maimonides' writings on the early Kabbalists, he was inclined to regard it as a secondary factor; he indeed observed the affinity between the opponents to the Jewish philosopher and those who were mystically biased⁵.

Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah have, however, more often been regarded by some medieval thinkers and modern scholars as considerably distinct speculative trends, a view to which I agree. If not always opposing each other, or competing for an impact on the souls and minds of the intelligentsia, they were portrayed as essentially diverse types of spirituality. Roughly speaking, this seems to me to be true, but only if we address the extreme forms of Kabbalah and philosophy. However, a perusal of Julius Guttman's *Philosophies of Judaism*, and Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* will put his dichotomy in medieval Jewish speculation in a rather sharper relief. The two summae of long years of research by the two great scholars who had established the Jerusalemite standard of research in their respective fields, are not inclined to offer more synthetic surveys of the whole field of Jewish thought, and then locate their own specific area of research. Jewish mysticism is marginalized in Guttman's *Philosophies of Judaism* while Jewish philosophy is only rarely treated in details in Scholem's *Major Trends*. A perusal of the extensive corpus of H.A. Wolfson, another colossus of the study of Jewish philosophy, reveals the same marginalization of Kabbalah, by a major historian of Jewish thought.

However, this initial strong demarcation of areas did not remain so influential in the subsequent scholarship of Jewish thought. Other scholars, belonging to the next generation, the most important among them being the late Professors Alexander Altmann, Georges Vajda and — later on in their writings — also Shelomo Pines, Joseph B. Sermoneta on the one hand or Isadore Twersky, Colette Sirat and S. O. Heller Wilensky on the other, were less predisposed toward strong dichotomies⁶. Especially important from our point of view is the concept of « rational mysticism » which recurs in scholarship more often in recent decades, under the impact of some of the aforementioned scholars, more eminently Georges Vajda, and the recurring attempts of scholars, in both the history of Aristotelianism

4. *Kabbalah*, New York, 1974, p. 45: « Kabbalah, in its historical significance, can be defined as the product of the interpenetration of Jewish Gnosticism and neoplatonism ».

5. G. SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, tr. A. Arkush, R. J. ZWI WERBLOWSKY (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, JPS, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 404-414. See, however, his statement in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1967, p. 24: « Kabbalah certainly did not arise as reaction against philosophical 'enlightenment' »; as well as his « Me-Hoqer li-Mequbbal », *Tarbiz*, vol. 6, 1935, p. 91-92 [Hebrew]; « Maimonide dans l'œuvre des Kabbalistes », *Cahiers juifs*, vol. 3, 1935, p. 104-105.

6. Georges VAJDA, « Un chapitre de l'histoire du conflit entre la Kabbale et la philosophie: la polémique anti-intellectualiste de Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi » in *Archives d'histoire*

and Neoplatonism, to highlight the more mystical implications of those forms of thought⁷. A medieval example of an effort to bridge the gap between the two domains of speculation is the attempt of some circles of Kabbalists to draw Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* on the side of the mystics⁸. On the other hand, there were Kabbalists, few indeed, who claimed that Kabbalah is the inner philosophy⁹. More recently, more mystical readings of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* have been proposed by some scholars¹⁰, while the wide range of the philosophical sources and speculative interpretations of the Kabbalistic types of thought, received more and more attention in scholarship¹¹. A crucial phase in the substantial

doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age, vol. XXXI, 1956, p. 45-127, *idem*, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age*, Paris, Mouton, 1962; *ibid.*, « Comment le philosophe juif Moïse de Narbonne comprenait-il les paroles extatiques des soufis? » *Actas del primer congreso de estudios arabes islamicos*, Madrid, 1964, p. 129-135; « Recherches sur la synthèse philosophico-kabbalistique de Samuel ibn Motot », *Ahdlna*, vol. XXVII, 1960, p. 29-63.

Alexander ALTMANN, « Moses Narboni's Epistle on Shi'ur Qomah », in A. ALTMANN (ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Cambridge, Mass. 1967, p. 242-244, *ibid.*, « Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera's Puerta del Cielo », *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 53, 1982, p. 321-324, as well as note 15 below.

Dov SCHWARTZ, « Contacts Between Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism in the Rise of the Fifteenth Century », *Daat*, vol. 29, 1992, p. 41-68 [Hebrew].

7. P. HADOT, Exercices spirituels, *Annuaire de la V^e section de l'École pratique des Hautes Études LXXXIV*, p. 25-70; Phillip MERLAN, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*, Hague, 1963, Richard T. WALLIS, « Nous as Experience », R. Baine HARRIS, (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, Norfolk, 1976, p. 122 and 143 note 1 for the pertinent bibliography; Michael MORGAN, *Platonic Piety, Philosophy & Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1990.

8. Scholem, « Mi-Hoqer li-Mequbbal ».

9. M. IDEL, « Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560-1660 », *Italia Judaica* [Roma, 1986], II, p. 243-262; reprinted in D.B. Ruderman, ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* [New York University Press, New York, 1992], pp. 345-368.

10. David BLUMENTHAL, « Maimonides' Intellectualist Mysticism and the Superiority of the Prophecy of Moses », *Studies in Medieval Culture*, vol. X, 1981, p. 51-67.

11. Ze'ev Harvey, « Kabbalistic Elements in R. Hasdai Crescas' book *Or ha-Shem* », *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. 2, 1983, p. 75-109 [Hebrew]; Moshe Hayyim WEILER, « Inquiries in the Kabbalistic Terminology of R. Joseph Gikatilla and its Relation to Maimonides », *HUCA* vol. 37, 1966, p. 13-44 [Hebrew]; Elliot R. WOLFSON, « Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered », *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. LVII, 1991, p. 179-242; Charles MOPSIK, « Philosophie et souci philosophique: les deux grands courants de la pensée juive », *Archivio di filosofia* vol. LXI, 1993, p. 247-254; Dov SCHWARTZ, « Divine Immanence in Medieval Jewish Philosophy », *Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. III, no. 2, 1994, p. 249-278; IDEL, « Divine Attributes and Sefirot in Jewish Theology », in S. O. Heller WILLENSKY, M. IDEL (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Thought*, Jerusalem, 1989, p. 87-112 [Hebrew]; *ibid.*, « The Study Program of Yohanan Alemanno », *Tarbiz*, vol. 48, 1979, p. 303-330 [Hebrew]; « The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance » in B. D. Cooperman (ed.), *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. 1983), p. 186-242; « Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in Early 17th Century », *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, Isadore TWERSKY-Bernard D. SEPTIMUS (eds.), [Cambridge, Mass., 1987],

encounter between philosophy and mysticism in Judaism is the middle of the 13th century Spain. Some figures who constitute the innovative Kabbalah, like Joseph Gikatilla and Abraham Abulafia and, to a less degree, Isaac ben Abraham ibn Latif¹², Moses de Leon, to a certain extent David ben Abraham ha-Lavan, and the anonymous author of the ecstatic treatise named Sha`arei Tzedeq, have moved from a philosophical stage, represented by a study of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, to different forms of Kabbalah.¹³ Though being Kabbalists, some of them nevertheless regarded the *Guide* as an important source which has to be understood in a more profound manner, by means of Kabbalistic concepts and exegetical devices. The writings of all those Kabbalists — with the important exceptions of R. Moses de Leon whose metamorphosis was much more radical than that of the others, and R. David ha-Lavan — can serve as an important field of research for the philosophico-mystical zone. The name of their game is super-arcanaization, namely offering a secret reading of an already esoteric treatise, Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

The question of the stand of the great eagle himself in relation to mysticism has been treated already in the middle thirties: Gershom Scholem has discussed the spurious attribution of mystical and quasi-mystical traditions and writings to Maimonides by Kabbalists¹⁴. Another important contribution to this topic is that of the late Prof. Alexander Altmann, who has carefully analysed the different approaches in crucial matters of religion as exposed by Maimonides and some Kabbalists¹⁵. Altmann has already resorted, in this context, to Abraham Abulafia's commentaries on secrets of the *Guide* and the present study is an attempt to offer a closer look to some of the questions related to Abulafia's attempt to read the *Guide*¹⁶. In the following, three moves which distinguish Abulafia's approach from that of Maimonides', and present in the former's commentaries of the *Guide*, will

1987], p. 137-200; « Kabbalah, Platonism and Prisca Theologia: the Case of Menasseh ben Israel » in Y. KAPLAN, H. MESHOULAN, R. POPKIN (eds.), *Menasseh ben Israel and his World*, Brill, Leiden, 1989, p. 207-219; Havah TIROSH-ROTHSCHILD, « Sefiroth as the Essence of God in the Writings of David Messer Leon », *Association of Jewish Studies Review*, vol. 7-8, 1982-1983, p. 409-425; Nissim YOSHA, *Myth and Metaphor*, Jerusalem, Ben-Zvi Institute and The Magnes Press, 1994, [Hebrew].

12. See Sara O. HELLER-WILENSKY, « Isaac ibn Latif, Philosopher or Kabbalist? » in A. ALTMANN (ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Cambridge, Mass, 1967, p. 185-223; « The Guide and the Gate, The Dialectical Influence of Maimonides on Isaac ibn Latif and Early Spanish Kabbalah », Ruth LINK-SALINGER et al. (eds.), *A Straight Path, Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture, Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1988, p. 266-278; and « Messianism, Eschatology and Utopia in the Philosophical-Mystical Trend of Kabbalah of the 13th Century », in Z. BARAS (ed.), *Messianism and Eschatology*, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 221-238 [Hebrew].

13. Isadore TWERSKY, *Studies in Jewish Law and Philosophy*, New York, KTAV Publishing House, 1982, p. 208 and WILENSKY, « Messianism », *ibid.*, p. 221.

14. SCHOLEM, « Mi-Hoqer » [note 5 above]. On this issue see more below.

15. Alexander ALTMANN, « Maimonides' Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism », *Studies in Jewish Thought*, Detroit, A. JOSPE (ed.), 1981, p. 200-219.

16. On this issue see also the important study of Wirszubski, referred below note 22.

be surveyed: Abulafia's emphasis on imminent salvation, his unitive-philosophical concepts, and the role of language and linguistic issues in his system. Though a superficial understanding of the nature of the three moves may assume that they represent unrelated topics they are, in Abulafia's writings, intertwined matters. By analyzing the processes of Kabbalistic arcanization of the *Guide* I hope to show a time again, that the boundaries between philosophy and mysticism are not clear-cut in Judaism as they are also vague in other forms of religion. In order to exemplify this statement, an analysis of some of the stands of Abraham Abulafia, especially as expressed in his commentaries on the *Guide* will be undertaken. The main aim of the following discussion is to point out to the manner in which Abulafia deviated from Maimonides' views expressed in the book commented upon.

II. SECRETS: FROM RESTORATION TO IMMINENT SALVATION

Maimonides argued that Jewish esotericism as described in his writings, old as it might have been in itself, is a matter of his own reconstruction¹⁷. This restoration is requested because of the loss of those secrets caused by the vicissitudes of the exile. Maimonides assumes that he can restore the broken line of transmission of the secrets of the Torah, and recreate, thereby, an already existing ideal situation. Maimonides does not offer any details as to what precisely has been the method of this retrieval, if this is a matter of his reading attentively the biblical texts, or by being inspired by the rabbinic hints on esoteric topics. In any case, this project can hardly be described as an eschatological one, at least from the historical point of view. If personal eschatological implications can be discerned in his project, it depends more on the attitude of the scholars. Maimonides's treatise is basically a past-oriented book, an archeological endeavour intended, by the explicit confession of its author, to guide the present perplexed ones out of their spiritual perplexion caused by the loss of secrets, which amounts to a misunderstanding of the scriptures. Indeed, someone may wonder if the restoration of the secret tradition is possible in the exile or, alternatively, if the restoration of the secret tradition is emblematic of a hidden eschatological dimension, imminent in historical moment Maimonides lived in. By and large, Maimonides' project in the *Guide* is an exegetical one, which has important repercussions for his contemporaries' attitude to Judaism, who could find an interesting religious outlook, especially for the Jewish intelligentsia which was exposed to non-Jewish forms of theology and philosophy¹⁸.

According to other traditions, however, secrets of the Torah will be revealed by the Messiah¹⁹. For some of those thinkers, this means a postponment of the reve-

17. *Guide*, I, p. 71.

18. This is the case in some other important figures of Jewish philosophy, like Sa'adiah Gaon, Leone Ebreo, M. Mendelssohn and F. Rosenzweig.

lation of those secrets to an indefinite future. Abraham Abulafia's interpretation of the secrets of the Torah takes place, according to his special awareness, under the aegis of the imminent redemption, both personal and national one. He himself is the Messiah of himself and the Messiah of the nation; in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* he indicates that he reveals secrets because of the imminence of the redemption²⁰. Indeed, his revelation of the secrets is facilitated by the feeling that the national eschaton is close, a matter of some few years²¹, while the very revelation of the secrets was conceived as helping the mystic to reach a mystical experience which has conspicuous salvific character on the personal plane. Secrets of the Torah, are intended to help the readers to attain a redemptive experience. The first of Abulafia's commentaries to the *Guide* is named *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah* in its Latin translation *Liber Redemptionis*²² while in another commentary, Abulafia asserts that the thirty-six secrets of the *Guide* are « all the secrets to which he will pay attention to understand them, by a [concentrated] speculation, and undertake the intention intended by them, and 'he will be redeemed'²³ »²⁴.

The verse in Hebrew, *Ge'ulah tihieh lo* has been understood by Abulafia in his particular way: redemption will be attained by means of the thirty-six secrets, hinted at by the word *lo*. Here, the nexus between secrets and redemption is explicit. A similar stand can be found also in the first commentary, *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah* where he identifies the « life of the soul » to the « life of the next world », both meaning *hasagah*, « comprehension »²⁵. This view occurs also in his second commentary *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*²⁶ and it should be understood in a non-eschatological framework: the next world is not the realm of existence after death, but the ecstatic experience in this world, as we learn from one of his most important books: *The Life of the Next World*. We witness here an important instant of spir-

19. See Giles Quispel, « From Logos to Mythos », *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 19 [1970], p. 330; Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, tr. I. Abrahams, [Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1979], pp. 308-312.

20. See *Sitrei TORAH*, « These secrets will be revealed during the advent of the Messianic era, by the prophets who will arise [then] and by the Messiah himself, because through them [the secrets of the Torah] all of Israel and those who are drawn to them, will be strengthened. ». Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 119a.

21. Abulafia's opinion was that the Messiah, apparently he himself, will reveal himself in 1290.

22. A description of the extant Hebrew fragments and the Latin translation is found in Chaim WIRSZUBSKI, « Liber Redemptionis—the Early Version of R. Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalistic *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed* in the Latin Translation of Flavius Mithridates », *Divrei ha-Akademia ha-Le'umit ha-Israelit le-Mada'im*, III, Jerusalem, 1970, p. 139-149, which will be quoted below from its reprinted form in Ch. WIRSZUBSKY, *Between the Lines, Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah and Sabbateanism*, M. IDEL (ed.), Jerusalem, 1990, p. 135-149 [Hebrew].

23. Leviticus, 25:31.

24. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 117a.

25. Ms. Leipzig 39, f. 4b. See also below beside note 38.

26. Ms. Munich 408, f. 1b.

tualisation of traditional eschatological terminology, interpreted in terms of imminent individual salvation, a phenomenon well-known in the history of mysticism²⁷. In this context, another observation of Abulafia's may be quite relevant. As we shall see below, he indicates that the number of the chapters of the *Guide* are 177, a number that is equivalent to the numerical value of *Gan 'Eden*, namely Paradise²⁸. It is less the need to attenuate the pernicious effects of the external exile, as Maimonides' reconstruction aspires to, and much more the attempt to obliterate the inner exile that is the main concern of Abulafian soteriology. In fact, the two approaches are not to be seen as drastically different but, at least insofar as Abulafia's views are concerned, as building upon the attainment of Maimonides: the philosopher has provided the framework, which means a political *Weltbild*, a philosophy of nature and a neo-Aristotelian metaphysics punctuated by some Platonic stands, and a psychology, which serve as starting points for an intensification of the religious life, which will culminate in a mystical experience.

III. FROM PHILOSOPHICAL NOETICS TO MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Maimonides was a moderate thinker, if we recall his view of the human intellect as hardly attaining a certain firm knowledge of God, his view of language as a conventional entity, and as such a weak instrument of knowing God or nature. The more modest characterizations of the powers of language and intellect are consonant to Maimonides' general search for the golden mean. The golden mean implies, however, also the negation of an extreme religious, or philosophical attainment. The awareness of the limitations of the human intellect, consonant to the stand of a sober philosopher, can be understood, as the late Prof. S. Pines proposed, as a pessimistic, almost tragic vision of the thinking man²⁹. The effort to push God beyond the range, though not of the scope, of human understanding in order to safeguard His outmost purity and spirituality, demanded a price in the realm of epistemology: the human intellect, connected as it is with matter, cannot experience the divine nature, though He is purely intellectual. It is only in the moment of death that the few elite, Moses and the forefathers, were able to attain the kiss of bliss, or an experience of God³⁰. Transcendence has its sublime moments, for which the philosopher oftenly pays in the cash of a very modest noetic attainment of the

27. This is quite obvious in the writings of Al-Ghazzali, for example; See also below, note 32 the discussion of the kiss of God.

28. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 115b. More on this issue see below § IX.

29. PINES, « The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja and Maimonides », in I. TWERSKY (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, Cambridge, Mass., 1979, p. 89-109.

30. *Guide*, III:51.

absolute intellectual realm, the divine. Unitive experiences were not conceived as possible in his system, and it may well be that Maimonides was deliberately reticent toward the Neoplatonic views on the cleaving of the soul to God, or the Averroistic unitive noetics³¹.

On the other hand Abulafia assumes that the death by kiss of the forefathers, an experience of hoary antiquity, should be seen in a much more exemplary and relevant manner; he asserts that

« whomever's soul will be separated from him at the time of pronouncing [the divine name] he will die by a kiss »³².

The prerogative of the few perfecti in the past, according to the view of Maimonides, turned into the immediate achievement of the extreme mystics available in the present³³. Abulafia also assumes that human intellect can become one entity with the divine mind, an experience that could be designated as mystical union. In my opinion this development in Abulafia's thought, in comparison to Maimonides' view, can be explained both by the acquaintance with Averroistic stands concerning the possibility of the union between the human and the cosmic intellect, which has been accepted by his teacher in matters of philosophy, Rabbi Hillel of Verona³⁴; and the mystical experiences Abulafia apparently underwent, which have been understood as pointing to a union with God. So, for example, he argues in one of his commentaries on the *Guide* that the actualization of the intellect will transform it into the entity that caused this process, namely the Agent Intellect, and the two will become « one inseparable entity during the time of that act³⁵ » In this vein the perfect mystic is described as follows:

« just as his Master³⁶ who is detached from all matter is called the Knowledge, the Knower and the Known, all at the same time, since all the three are one in Him, so shall he, the exalted man, the master of the exalted Name, be called intellect, while he is actually knowing; then he is also the known like his Master, and then there is no difference between them, except that his Master has His supreme rank by His own right and not derived from other creatures, while he is elevated to his rank by the intermediary of the creatures »³⁷.

31. *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany, Suny Press, 1987, p. 125.

32. *Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*, Ms. Oxford 1582, f. 14b; IDEL, « Maimonides and Kabbalah » [note 3 above], p. 77-78.

33. For more on the death of kiss in kabbala in general see the material collected and analyzed in IDEL, *The Mystical Experience*, note 31 above, p. 180-184 and more recently Michael FISHBANE, *The Kiss of God*, Seattle, Washington University Press, 1994, p. 39-41.

34. On this figure see the studies of Joseph B. Sermoneta, mentioned in his last article « Thine Ointments Have a Goodly Fragrance: Rabbi Judah Romano and the Open Text Method », in M. IDEL, W. Z. HARVEY, E. SCHWEID (eds.), *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume*, vol. II, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 77-114 [Hebrew].

35. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 774, f. 140a.

36. Namely the Agent Intellect, envisioned as Metatron. For more on this passage see IDEL, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 10.

37. *Commentary on Sefer ha-yashar*, Ms. Rome-Angelica 38, f. 31b-32a; *Major Trends*, p. 382; IDEL, *The Mystical Experience*, note 31 above, p. 126.

This hyperevaluation of the intellect is coupled, as we shall see below, by a simultaneous hyperevaluation of speech. Language is both a domain of contemplation, higher than nature, and a technique for attaining a mystical experience, which has noetic features. In other words, the overactivation of the intellect and its merging with God, is achieved by an overactivation of language, as part of its use as a component in a mystical technique. The two extremes meet, and both are characteristic of Abulafia's strong propensity for actualization of some of Maimonides' spiritual ideals of the past. This view is expressed at the very beginning of *Sitrei Torah* where Abulafia characterises the *Guide* as « concerned with the explanation of homologies and the interpretation of the parables of the prophecy » while his own commentary is intended to deal with

« religious wisdom, namely the interpretation of the rationale for the life of the rational soul³⁸, and the interpretation of the worship of God out of love. And even if the subject of each of them [the two books] is unique in itself, everything goes to the same place »³⁹.

In lieu of Maimonides' hermeneutical project, which is focused on natural and metaphysical frameworks, Abulafia proposes a spiritual interpretation of the Bible as pointing not only to the true meaning of the Bible, and the proper theology, but more eminently a pressing call for an intense spiritual life. The intensification of this spiritual life meant, in the case of Abulafia, involves an ecstatic path which was conceived of as inducing prophetic experiences which were understood as indicative of a Messianic status.

IV. FROM LOST SECRETS TO THEIR PUBLIC TRANSMISSION

Maimonides' *Guide* is a written document, and the strategies to which the author has resorted reflect this choice, as Leo Strauss has pointed out⁴⁰. Maimonides' refusal to meet R. Samuel ibn Tibbon, the translator of his main theological writing, and in many ways the follower of Maimonides, in order to discuss with him the content of his book orally is emblematic of his decision not to pass its secrets but in a written, and thus allusive, form⁴¹. The secrets he claimed to have reconstructed were not supposed to become an oral tradition, as they were according to the

38. See also above beside note 25.

39. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 115b.

40. Leo STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago, 1952, p. 74.

41. For an up-to-date treatment of esotericism in Maimonides and his followers see Aviezer RAVITSKY, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom, Studies in the History of Jewish Philosophy*, Jerusalem, 1991, p. 142-181 [Hebrew]. For an English version of this chapter see « Secrets of the Guide to the Perplexed: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries », in I. Twersky (ed.), *Studies in Maimonides*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 159-207.

Rabbinic sources, but remained buried in a written text, perplexing the future generations of intellectual Jews.

Kabbalists, however, unlike philosophers, have nevertheless argued that such an oral tradition related to the *Guide* is still available. Again, the concept of oral transmission, that has some sources in Jewish esoterics, but has silently been put aside by Maimonides, was invoked by a Kabbalist in order to interpret his book. Abulafia has taught the *Guide* to some young Jewish intellectuals, and at least one of his commentaries was written, according to Abulafia's claim, at the request of his former students. As a teacher of the *Guide*, Abulafia has conspicuously been involved in oral teaching and discussions, which are reflected in a written fashion in the commentaries. Thus, oral transmission of secrets was, for Abulafia, a praxis which, contradicting as it may be Maimonides' own explicit interdiction and the Kabbalists' esoteric propensity, was very much part of his activity: he taught the *Guide* in Spain, Greece and Italy⁴². His formulations on this matter are much closer to Nahmanides' famous statement in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, concerning the transmission of Kabbalah⁴³. So, for example, Abulafia asserts that

« the secrets of the Torah, and the secrets of reality⁴⁴ and the foundations of the commandments, are not told but orally, from a perfect person to someone who merits to receive the perfection, face to face, after the test and the trial, [regarding] the intention of the receiver, if he is meritorious and it is right to transmit [them] to him or not »⁴⁵.

Abulafia writes, again, in one of his epistles, that

« despite the fact that Kabbalah is transmitted to every illuminati in general, not every listener and receiver is able to actualize it because what it is transmitted from it [namely the Kabbalah] are but headings of chapters, [intended] to whomever is wise, and understanding from his own knowledge »⁴⁶.

Unlike the Maimonidean esoteric, which seems to be esoteric for at least two main reasons, the Rabbinic interdiction to disclose some secrets, as well as for more

42. IDEL, « Maimonides and Kabbalah », note 3 above, p. 59-62. For Abulafia's straightforward rejection of Kabbalistic esotericism see his declaration in *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*: « I know that there are many Kabbalists who are not perfect, thinking as they do that their perfection consists in not revealing a secret issue; I shall care neither about their thought nor about their blaming me because of the disclosure, since my view on this is very different from, and even opposite, theirs », Oxford, Ms., 1580, f. 55a.

43. See note 91 below.

44. This phrase occurs in the *Guide*, II:26; S. PINES, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1963, p. 331 translates it as « mystery of being ». In general I prefer the term « secret » to that of mystery in some instances.

45. *Shomer Mitzvah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 853, f. 74ab.

46. *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah*, printed in A. JELLINEK, *Philosophie und Kabbala*, Leipzig, 1854, p. 12; Chayim HENOKH, *Nahmanides, Philosopher and Mystic*, Jerusalem, 1978, p. 32, note 14 [Hebrew].

political reasons, stemming from the Platonic tradition, in ecstatic Kabbalah one of the main reasons is the fact that the recipient must be a philosophically oriented person in order to be initiated into the secrets of Kabbalah.

The anonymous Kabbalist who authored *Sefer ha-Tzeruf*, an ecstatic Kabbalist himself, said that

« whatever is transmitted concerning this lore, are 'heads of chapters', and this is why it needs the intellect, and it is called intellectual Kabbalah⁴⁷ because it is not like the other sciences, namely the propadeutic ones, which are transmitted alone... But this lore, known as Kabbalah, it is impossible to transmit it in toto in an oral manner, even not in a written form, even for thousands of years. And whatever a kabbalist will make an effort to interpret, everything is a hint and a 'head of chapters' »⁴⁸.

This Kabbalist, even more than Abulafia, understands Kabbalah in a more experiential and hermeneutical manner that renders the experience ineffable and interpretation a never ending enterprise. Transmission of secrets has been prohibited by the ancient Rabbis for reasons that are not so clear and has been reinforced by Maimonides for political reasons. Abulafia was ready to adopt a much more lenient position on this issue, while the anonymous ecstatic kabbalist quoted above has conceived it as almost impossible in its totality, provided both the experiential cargo implied in the practice of this lore and the vagueness of the linguistic material related to transmission. Both the vagueness of the experience and the nature of the text, which cannot be exhausted, necessitate the intellectual articulation, and this is why the Kabbalah is, in the way it is presented in oral or written manner, an intellectual lore. Its linguistic expressions entice already a certain explication. The move from the political esotericism to the psychological and hermeneutical problems involved in transmission invite a much greater emphasis on language from the point of view of the Kabbalists. While Maimonides would assume that the political secrets can be articulated and therefore transmitted — would such an act be advisable — the Kabbalists would look for a content that is much more focused upon language itself, and not only conceiving language as a necessary, though inferior, communicative tool.

47. Qabbalah sikhlit. See also in the same book, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 770, f. 161b, 176b, where the same issue may be understood both by means of Kabbalah and the intellect. On fol. 163a, the author advises receiving the Kabbalistic tradition by means of the intellect, in a manner reminiscent of Abulafia's position.

48. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 770, f. 175b. Throughout this book, the phrase 'rashei pera'iqim' recurs, pointing in some instances to the combinatory technique based on *Sefer Yetzirah*. See also Abulafia's *Sefer 'Imrei Shefer*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 777, p. 91.

V. LANGUAGE: FROM CONVENTIONAL TO NATURAL

Maimonides' view on language, including Hebrew, is that it is a conventional phenomenon. This view has far-reaching repercussions on his view of revelation and Scriptures and it has been already analyzed by scholars⁴⁹. It is on this issue that sharp critiques of Kabbalists were addressed to Maimonides' thought. More evident in some writings of R. Joseph Gikatilla, a student of Abulafia, or in a less conspicuous way by the elevation of the Hebrew to a sublime status of a perfect language, in Abulafia's own books Maimonides is not criticised on this point, though his stand was not accepted. Let me start with the more extreme formulations, which are characteristic of the beginning of a retreat from the Maimonidean thought in 13th century Castille. In a very striking passage found in a commentary on some topics in the *Guide*, printed as the work of Gikatilla, it is said that

« Regarding all the languages of the world, with the exception of the holy language, there is no purpose in asking the reasons for the particular letters of a word, since they are the results of human convention, and do not reflect nature, namely they are result of a nation's decision to call something such and so. Therefore, the words of their languages do not possess an inner structure⁵⁰. Whereas with the holy language this is not the case, because it is not a language that people agreed upon, but rather, is indeed born of Divine wisdom which has no end, and is entirely established in accordance with Divine intent »⁵¹.

Gikatilla negates the naturalness of the other languages and, in contrast, sees Hebrew as the Divine language. Elsewhere, when criticising Maimonides' conception of language, he writes:

« But the meaning of [the verse]⁵² 'This is its name' is that it is its true name, in accordance with Divine wisdom, based on the Supernal Book. For Adam received it all by the way of Kabbalah, and the Holy One Blessed be He informed him as to the secret orders of the universe, and the secrets of His Chariots and the ways of causality and the hidden potencies behind all orders, and after He had informed him of these he was properly able to call each thing by its true name, in accordance with the Divine Intent »⁵³.

49. On Maimonides and language see Jean ROBÉLIN, *Maimonide et le langage religieux*, PUF, Paris, 1991; Arthur HYMAN, « Maimonides on Religious Language », Kraemer, p. 175-191.

50. *Diqduq penimi*.

51. Printed in *She'elot la-hakham R. Saul Ashkenazi*, Venice, 5334-1574, f. 20c-d. On the attribution of Gikatilla, see GOTTLIEB, *Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah*, J. HACKER (ed.), Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 110. On the 'calling of names' as an expression for understanding the link between phenomena in the lower world and their roots in the supernal world, see Roland GOETSCHÉL, *R. Meir Ibn Gabbai; Le Discours de la Kabbale espagnole*, Leuven, 1981, p. 366-367, 416.

52. Genesis 2:19.

53. *She'elot le-Hakham*, note 51 above, f. 27b-28a. For the importance of the Adamic source of Kabbalah as centred on language see M. IDEL, « Transmission of Kabbalah in the 13th Century » [forthcoming].

This tells us that man issued names to phenomena after understanding their true nature « the secret orders of the world » « the ways of causality. » Thus, language is not only a result of revelation but is the true expression of the essence of various phenomena by the virtue of what I would propose to call 'linguistic immanence'⁵⁴. With this view in mind, we may say that the aforementioned quote from Be'urei ha-Moreh « ...since they are the results of human convention, and do not reflect nature » means that their languages are conventional, as opposed to Hebrew, which is conceived to be a natural language. In another passage, stemming from the circle of Gikatilla, we learn that

« And it is necessary that we believe that the language of the Torah is not a result of convention as some illustrious rabbis of previous generations had thought. For if one were to say that the language that the Torah employs is a result of convention, as is the case with the other languages, we would end up denying the [Divine Revelation] of the Torah, which was in its entirety imparted to us from God. And you already know [regarding the verse]⁵⁵ 'For he desecrated the word of God' that this refers to one who says that the Torah is conventional, but that the rest is from heaven, our sages have already stated that anyone who says that the entire Torah, save for one word, is of Divine origin, such a person has desecrated the word of God⁵⁶. And if the language of the Torah is in its original a conventional one, like all other languages, regarding which the Torah states 'for there did God confound the language of all the earth,' it [Hebrew] would be like all other languages. »⁵⁷.

Another Kabbalist, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, a younger contemporary of Gikatilla and Abulafia, has actually denied that Maimonides would expose a view of language as conventional. In a passage that is significant from many points of view, he claims that

« God forbid that Maimonides has intended this. Who has stood up among the geonim, who is like him? But his words are [to be understood] according to notes [Rashei paraqim] which are understood by someone who has received his secrets orally »⁵⁸.

Here, the Kabbalist denies the rather obvious Maimonidean view of the nature of Hebrew language as conventional, in favor of the Kabbalistic opinion as to its divine origin⁵⁹. Thus, an oral secret tradition is invoked in order to circumvent, or even deny, Maimonides' authentic opinion.

54. See M. IDEL, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1995, p. 215-218.

55. Numbers 16:31.

56. *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin*, f. 99a.

57. Ma'amar `al Penimiyyut ha-Torah, printed by Gershom SCHOLEM, in *Qiryat Sefer*, vol. 6, 1930, p. 111-112. On this text see also Gottlieb, *Mehqarim* [note 51 above], p. 128-131. 61) See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* [note 59 above], pp. 11-14.

58. *Perush Sefer Yetzirah*, Jerusalem, 1961, f. 31d. On oral tradition as necessary for the understanding of the Guide see also *ibid.*, f. 55c and Idel, « Transmission » [note 53 above], Appendix.

59. On this issue see VAJDA, « Un chapitre » [note 6 above], p. 49-56, 130-133; Moshe IDEL, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany, SUNY, 1989, p. 1-29.

Some Kabbalists were, therefore, well aware of the ultimate implications of the reduction of the sacrosanct language, the portent of many topics of Jewish mysticism, to a merely conventional tongue. They understood that the acceptance of the philosopher's view on this issue may undermine their spirituality, based upon a linguo-centric mentality, may endanger their specific form of Kabbalah as well as the very foundation of the Torah. However, this fear appears in the writings of kabbalists who have already shifted toward a more theosophical mode of thought. Gikatilla was on this path when writing the passage quoted above, while Joseph Ashkenazi was already an accomplished theosophical Kabbalist. Abulafia, however, though moving from philosophy to Kabbalah, never embraced the sefirotic Kabbalah, but, at least in his latter years, he offered some poignant critiques to its address⁶⁰.

VI. MAIMONIDES: SECRETS AND LINGUISTIC HERMENEUTICS

Even Abulafia, the most ardent of Maimonides' admirers among the Kabbalists, tacitly dissents from him on this issue⁶¹. In his case, a very interesting process can be discerned: Maimonides' attempt to reduce the importance of language, in favor of a much more mentalistic approach, has been ignored by the ecstatic Kabbalist, who resorted precisely to linguistic devices in order to achieve the very aims he conceived that Maimonides' preached. The synthesis Abulafia offers is almost an attempt to reconcile the opposites; the elements in Jewish tradition ignored by Maimonides, like *Sefer Yetzirah* for example, become cornerstones for his interpretations of the *Guide*. Or, to put it in another way: for Maimonides, language has a communicative function, but could serve neither as a domain of contemplation nor as a catalyst for intellection. These two functions are precisely those which have been emphasized by Abulafia. According to his view, language is higher than nature and can therefore substitute the philosophical contemplation of nature⁶². On the other hand, language, more precisely Hebrew, serves as an integral part of the technique of bringing someone to a mystical experience⁶³. This emphasis upon the paramount importance of Hebrew is well taken in one of Abulafia's comparisons between Kabbalah and philosophy, where he declares that the existence of the Agent Intellect

« is achieved according to the path of wisdom by means of every language but, according to Kabbalah, its speech cannot be attained but by means of the holy language alone. However,

60. See Abulafia's *Ve-Zot li-Yihudah*, printed by Adolph JELLINEK, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, Erstes Heft, Leipzig, 1853, p. 18-19.

61. See IDEL, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* [note 59 above], p. 11-14.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 1-3.

63. IDEL, *The Mystical Experience* [note 31 above], p. 22-24.

the existence of the [agent] intellect can be understood in every language, according to the view of every perfect kabbalist »⁶⁴.

Conspicuously, this hierarchy of languages shows that Maimonides' approach, expressed as everyone knew in Arabic, is part of the path of wisdom, namely philosophy, which can impart knowledge, but not a revelation that is conditioned by the resort to Hebrew. Is this insistence upon the superiority of the Hebrew over the regular philosophical parlance a total misinterpretation of Maimonides' stand? In general the answer is yes. However, at least in one case, it seems that Abulafia has a case for his resort to one of his linguistic interpretive approach in the *Guide* itself. Maimonides mentions in one of his discussions that the proper understanding of a certain verse in Zechariah may be achieved by means of changing the order of the letters which constitutes a certain word:

« More wonderful⁶⁵ than this⁶⁶ is the intimation aroused through the use of a certain term whose letters are identical with those of another term; solely the order of the letters is changed; and between the two terms there is in no way an etymological connection or a community of meaning. You will find an example in the parables of Zechariah when, in a vision of prophecy, he takes two staves in order to order to shepherd cattle, naming one of them grace [no`am] and the other ravages [hovlim]⁶⁷. The intention of this parable was to show that in its beginnings the religious community subsisted in the grace of the Lord...Afterwards the state of this community came to such a pass that obedience to God became repugnant to it and that it became repugnant to God. Accordingly He set up hovlim [ravagers] like Jeroboam and Manasseh as its chiefs. This is to be understood according to the etymological derivation of the word; for hovlim derives from the expression mehabelim keramim [that spoil the vineyards]⁶⁸. In addition, the prophet inferred therefrom, I mean from the term hovlim, their repugnance for the Law and the repugnance of God for them. However, this meaning can only be derived from hovlim, through changing the order of the 'ha', the 'ba', and the 'lam'. Now it says, within the context of this parable, to signify the notion of repugnance and disgust: 'And My soul became impatient of them, and their soul also loathed [bohalah] Me⁶⁹. » Accordingly it changed the order of habol and transformed it into bahol. Through this method very strange things appear, which are likewise secrets, as in its dictum with regards to the Chariot: brass and burnished and foot and calf and lightning, and in other passages. If you carefully examine each passage in your mind, they will become clear to you — after your attention has been aroused — from the gist of what has been set forth here. »⁷⁰

Maimonides attempts to related the two terms that occurs in the same context in Zechariah: Hovlim and bohalah. According to his proposal, by changing the order

64. Introduction to the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Ms. Moscow-Ginsburg, 133, f. 20a.

65. I have preferred this translation to « strange », because « wonderful » is closer to ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation, employed by Abulafia, *nifla*'.

66. The issue of prophetic parables.

67. ZECHARIAH, 11:7.

68. Song of Songs, 2:15.

69. ZECHARIAH, 11:8.

70. *Guide of the Perplexed*, II, ch. 43; PINES, p. 392-393.

of letters one may learn the intention of the parable: the Israelite kings who were designated as hoblim, namely the ravagers are also those who have loathed the Torah and have been loathed by Him. However, what seems to be important from the vantage point of our discussion is not only the peculiar example, but also the rhetorics involved in it. By changing the order of letters someone may indeed find out some strange things, and I read it as bizarre, or irrelevant conclusions, but also attain some secrets, even such as related to the most sublime realm of speculation: the divine chariot. It is this last point that is important for Abulafia: by manipulation the order of letters, someone may reach, at least in some instances, secrets of the Torah. It is quite obvious that Maimonides does not restrict this method to one instance alone, but asserts that this particular case should inspire similar types of interpretations, apparently regarding « each passage ». The Hebrew translation invites indeed a much more comprehensive understanding of Maimonides: « and in place other than this one, when you will search by your mind, in every place the things will become clear to you, by the dint of this intimation ». Interestingly enough, though a negative attitude toward some of the possible results of these permutations is shortly expressed, the more positive attitude seems to be more evident, and the end of the passage does not reiterate the negative remark. Moreover, Maimonides offers some examples which should be decoded by the method he has proposed, some words from the first chapter of Ezekiel, which are prone to a similar interpretation. However, he does not embark an additional exposition of how to interpret these words in detail. I would say that none of these words can be interpreted by the same method since it is impossible to find in the context of these words other words which contain the same letters in a different order. However, we may assume, following some of the commentators, that by changing the order of the letters alone, without finding a word that indeed is constituted by those letters in the given context. So, for example, some commentators propose to understand the term brass, namely nehoshet, as pointing to has-hatah, namely corruption, while qalal, burnished, can point to qal, ease, namely easily corruptible. The calf, egel, may be understood as pointing to the concept of roundness, `agol, as indeed Maimonides himself points out later on in the *Guide* III:2⁷¹. Last but not least, the term lightning, Hashmal, has been understood by the commentators, following a talmudic interpretation, as compound of two words, Hash and mal, namely silent and speaking, as two states of the angelic activity⁷². This last « etymology » is quoted explicitly by Maimonides in his exposition of the Chariot, in part III ch. 7⁷³ where also another 'etymology' is offered⁷⁴. Thus, we may assume that the hermeneutical principle of derivation of meaning by means of speculations related to the linguistic structure of the word, and its possible

71. PINES, *ibid.*, p. 418.

72. See *Hagigah*, f. 13ab.

73. PINES, p. 429-430.

74. For more on this important topic in Jewish esotericism, see *Guide*, III:5, PINES, p. 425-426.

meanings as derived from the permutations of its letters, was not a matter of an abstract theory, but of a practice that Maimonides indeed accepted, at least in those cases mentioned above. Moreover, in another important discussion, which involves a certain hermeneutical vision, Maimonides compares two different discussions of the Chariot in order to learn from the parallel between the « face of an ox » and the « face of a cherubin », the latter understood as a face of a child, that also the ox should be understood as the face of a man that is similar to an ox. In this context, he refers to « derivations of words, as we have indicated in a flash », apparently, as pointed out by commentators and by Pines, referring to II:43⁷⁵. It is difficult to ascertain whether those commentators are always right when pointing out the details of how Maimonides would interpret some of the words he mentioned there. However, the very fact that Jewish philosophers, who cannot be suspected of mystical or Kabbalistic leanings had to resort to such a type of interpretation of Maimonides' text is quite emblematic to the importance of the linguistic hermeneutics implicit in this important Maimonidean passage. Abulafia has capitalized on this passage in order to convince his readers that his own linguistic approach can be endorsed by Maimonides' own view. I am aware of at least four discussions of this passage of Maimonides in Abulafia's writings. So, for example, in his *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, after quoting II:43, he wrote about Maimonides that

« he has explained the issue of the order of the letters [zakhar(iah)] and it is called by the Kabbalists the combination of letters »⁷⁶.

In his epistle, *Sheva` Netivot ha-Torah*, he simply states that

« he has testified on the secret of combinations in part II when discussing the issue of prophecy, when dealing with the word BHL and HBL »⁷⁷.

Abulafia implies that Maimonides was not only hinting at a certain conceptual aspect, namely the secrets involved in Zechariah's verses and in the nouns found in the Chariot account, but also to the possibility that a secret technique of interpretation, by means of combinations of letters is alluded by the *Guide* in the chapter under consideration. It is important to point out that Abulafia explicitly indicates that this technique, which is a secret, is also that of the Kabbalists. Still this is not to say, according to these quotes and others to the same effect, that Abulafia described Maimonides as a Kabbalist; he was careful enough not to take this step: nevertheless, he came very close to it indeed.

75. See III:1, PINES, p. 417.

76. Ms. Munchen 408, f. 30a.

77. *Philosophie und Kabbala* [note 46 above], p. 20.

VII. FROM IMAGINATION TO LANGUAGE

How does language work in a Kabbalistic system that is so dependent upon Maimonides' psychology as Abulafia's is?

For our purpose here it will suffice to mention here the relationship between linguistic creativity and the imaginative faculty: language is, according to Aristotelian views as exposed by Maimonides, based upon images and is bound to time and place. As such a certain tension between language and the intellectual, which is conceived to be an atemporal type of cognition, is permeating Maimonides' thought. This philosopher is preoccupied with the relation between intellect and imagination, while the tension between language and intellect is less explicit in his thought. In his definition of prophecy, Maimonides speaks about the transmission of the intellectual forms, emanated from the Agent Intellect, upon the human intellect and then upon imagination. It is only then that the intellectual is translated in imaginary terms, which are either visual, namely images, or linguistic, viz. voices⁷⁸. In other words, imagination stands between intellect and language. However, in some discussions of Abulafia, language, more precisely speech, is conceived as standing between the intellect and imagination. In his discussion of the last of the thirty-six secrets, « worship of God out of love » Abulafia writes that

« You should know that speech alone is not the intellect, but it is the true faculty of the soul. And there is, in soul, no natural faculty that is higher than it is because the separate intellect emanates upon it its intellect, just as the sun is emanating light upon the eye. Speech is a faculty in the soul that is similar to the eye in relation to the sun, which generates light upon it. And the light of the eye is the very light of the sun, and not something different from it. Likewise the intellect of the soul⁷⁹ is the very emanation of the Agent Intellect, not something different from it. And the speech, as conceptualized⁸⁰ in the intellect, and the imaginative faculty⁸¹ and the appetitive faculty and the sensitive one, are ruled by it [...] and the intellect commands to the speech, and the speech commands the appetitive, and the appetitive to imagination, and imagination to the senses, and the senses are moving, in order to fulfill the command of the intellect. »⁸²

Elsewhere, in the continuation of the above discussion, we learn that « the intellect does not operate upon our soul but by means of speech »⁸³ and again, « the intellect does stir the appetitive faculty by the means of speech »⁸⁴. These descriptions are quite exceptional pieces of medieval psychology. The faculty of speech is seen as

78. *Guide*, II:32, PINES, p. 369.

79. *Nefesh ha-Sekhel*.

80. *Mezuyyar ba-sekhel*. On the term *ziyyur* as forming a concept see H.A. WOLFSON, « The Term *Tasawwur* and *Tasdiq* in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents », *The Moslem World*, April, 1943, p. 1-15.

81. *Ve-koah ha-medammeh*.

82. *Sefer Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munchen 408, f. 91ab.

83. *Ibid.*, f. 92a.

84. *Ibid.*

different from both the intellectual one, and the imaginative faculty. It mediates between the intellect and all the lower faculties, though the mechanism of this mediation is not quite clear. Perhaps Abulafia assumes that speech is necessary since it may translate the purely intellectual intention into much more explicate linguistic terms. In any case, this unique status of speech is not found in the *Guide* though it is not unknown in Abulafia's other writings⁸⁵. Moreover, he sometimes interprets in many of his writings the whole range of components of Maimonides' definition of prophecy: Agent Intellect, the overflow, the human intellect and the imagination, in linguistic terms. So, for example, we learn in one instance that:

«...the true essence of prophecy, its cause is the 'word' that reaches the prophet from God by means of the 'perfect language' that includes under it the seventy languages »⁸⁶.

The « word » plays the role of the overflow in Maimonides' definition of prophecy, the perfect language being no other than Maimonides' Agent Intellect, and this is the case also insofar as the seventy languages are concerned. It is this ascent of the importance of language and of linguistic imagery that is unique with Abulafia as an interpreter of Maimonides' *Guide*. Some Greek forms of ontology and psychology, as reverberating in the Middle Ages, have been translated in linguistic terms. The process of transformation of intellection into language, which took place according to Maimonides only at the level of the inter-human psychology, when the imagination translates the abstract concepts into linguistic units, takes place in Abulafia at the very source of the intellectual realm, at least insofar as the Agent Intellect is concerned.

VIII. FROM MAIMONIDES TO NAHMANIDES

Despite the fact that the mystical secrets Abulafia discussed are viewed quite oftenly as those exposed by Maimonides, it is also true that in some instances he is aware of his resort to Kabbalah as an approach differing from the Maimonidean type of exegesis. So, for example, Abulafia mentions both the Maimonidean interpretations of the Bible by means of equivocal terms and allegories, just as he has done in one of the previous quotes⁸⁷, as well as combinations of letters, acronyms,

85. See M. IDEL, *R. Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrines*, Jerusalem, Ph. D. Hebrew University, 1976, p. 98-99 [Hebrew]; *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* [note 36 above], p. 6.

86. *Sheva` Netivot ha-Torah*, p. 8; IDEL, R. ABULAFIA, *ibid.*, p. 86-87, 92-93, 96, 98-99, 103. I hope to elaborate elsewhere on the possible importance of this unique status of language as a form of cognition higher than imagination for later developments of the description of man as having the form of speech, as in Dante for example. See, for the time being, Umberto ECO, « Forma Locutionis » *Filosofia* '91 a cura di Gianni Vattimo, Laterza, 1992, p. 176-183.

87. See above, beside note 39, the quote from *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 115b.

ends of words, permutations of letters and notariqon. The first has been exposed, as he openly acknowledged, in Maimonides' *Guide*. The goal of his commentary on the *Guide* is, however

« to reveal its secrets to the illuminati, including the disclosure of the secrets of the Torah, in accordance to our Kabbalah. This is why this commentary is called *Sitrei Torah* »⁸⁸.

A similar statement, found also in his earlier commentary on the *Guide*, *Sefer ha-Ge'ulah*, is very important for understanding of Abulafia's attitude to the *Guide*; he indicates that there is

« the path of the *Guide*, and [another one] according to my own path⁸⁹, that is the path of Kabbalah... the paths of Kabbalah which are the secrets⁹⁰ of *Sefer Yetzirah* »⁹¹.

The occurrence of the first person forms: « our Kabbalah » and « my own Kabbalah », points to the sharp awareness that he exposes a spiritual path that differs from that of Maimonides. Abulafia's mentioning *Sefer Yetzirah* as his own way reflects his very high evaluation of this book, represented, inter alia, in his devoting three books to its contents⁹². However, what seems to be quite fascinating is that Maimonides, who never quoted or referred to this ancient, and quite famous work, which is one of the foundation stones of Jewish mysticism — this strategy being part of Maimonides' deliberated politics of citation or ignoring some 'embarrassing' books — has been combined precisely with *Sefer Yetzirah*. Abulafia was, however, aware that it is his own spiritual method that is combined with that of Maimonides'. The two paths, that of Maimonides' and Abulafia's own blend, which introduced the linguistic combinatory techniques, have been part of the topics he attempted to teach in various parts of southern Europe⁹³.

Quite often, Abulafia mentions also another source of his Kabbalah, mainly its linguistic approach, the writings of Hasidei Ashkenaz, which had provided crucial topics for Abulafia's linguistic approach to Kabbalah; these mystical sources are quite important for the essence of some mystical and hermeneutical aspects of the ecstatic Kabbalah, and even mentioned sometimes in Abulafia's commentaries on the *Guide*. Here, however, I would like to elaborate upon another kind of source, which contributed something to Abulafia's exposition of Kabbalah as a matter of linguistic techniques. On the page in *Sitrei Torah* where he mentions 'our Kabbalah' Abulafia has also introduced a well-known statement, taken from Nahma-

88. *Sitrei Torah*, *ibid.*, f. 118b. On the glossed Latin version of this statement, see WIRZUBSKY, *Between the Lines*, [note 22 above], p. 146-147.

89. Darkiy 'aniy.

90. *Sitrei Sefer Yetzirah*.

91. Ms. Leipzig 39, f. 5b. On the Latin, glossed version of this statement, see WIRZUBSKY, *Between the Lines*, [note 22 above], p. 143.

92. *Sefer Gan Na'ul*, *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz* and a commentary printed by Yisrael WEINSTOCK, Jerusalem, Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1984.

93. See IDEL, « Maimonides and Kabbalah » [note 3 above], p. 61-62.

nides' introduction of his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* which deals with a tradition, apparently stemming from magical sources⁹⁴, that the whole Torah can be read as a continuum of divine names⁹⁵. According to Abulafia, in this issue, as well as other similar, but unidentified topics

« all the secrets of the Torah are hidden, which enable someone to penetrate the reality in a right manner, and create the apprehensions of God in the heart of the illuminati »⁹⁶.

This explicit resort to Nahmanides' passage from his introduction can be found several times in Abulafia's commentaries on the Guide⁹⁷. It betrays, so I assume, an assumption that the secrets of the Torah of Moses, can be decoded by means of authoritative, though quite diverging exegetical techniques found in the writings of the two other great Moses: Maimonides and Nahmanides. Thus, in a deep manner, for Abulafia, both Moses ben Maimon and Moses ben Nahman, are conceived of as the two great commentators of the ancient Moses' book, the Pentateuch. However, as we well know, the thought of the historical Maimonides was remote from any type of magico-linguistic hermeneutics, while Nahmanides' attitude to allegory in the vein of Maimonides, and to the free gematria type of hermeneutics, was more than reticent⁹⁸. Abulafia's juxtaposition of the two masters is, therefore, a quite unexpected endeavor. However, it should be emphasized that Abulafia's project does not attempt to harmonize between the two authors. Rather, we may assume that Nahmanides' kind of exegesis is conceived to be superior to the allegorical one, and later on in Abulafia's career, he will classify Maimonides' form of allegorical exegesis as the fourth out of seven, while techniques similar to that of Nahmanides', as one of the three superior, kabbalistic exegetical techni-

94. «The concept of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah », *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. I, 1982, p. 52-55 [Hebrew]; on the Ashkenazi version of this view see Elliot Wolfson « The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism », *JQR*, vol. LXXXIV, 1993, p. 43-77.

95. Introduction to the *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, CHAVEL (ed.), Jerusalem, 1984, vol. I, p. 6.

96. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 118b-119a:

ובכל אילו הענינים

והדומים להם נסתר כל סודות התורה המעמיקים המציאות באמת

והם ממצויאים בלב המשכילים השגות א"ל.

97. See also *Sheva` Netivot ha-Torah* [note 46 above], p. 20 and IDEL, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, p. 46 and p. 171, note 80.

98. SCHOLEM, *Origins of the Kabbalah* [note 5 above], p. 387-388. On Nahmanides' reticence toward gematria and its significance see M. IDEL, « We have no kabbalistic tradition on this » in I. TWERSKY (ed.), *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in his religious and literary virtuosity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, p. 58-59.

ques⁹⁹. Thus, in his commentaries on Maimonides' secrets, Abulafia adduces conspicuous non-Maimonidean exegetical devices, which are intended to uncover secrets of the Torah. By his calling one of his commentaries by the title *Sitrei Torah*, Abulafia implies that Maimonides' own interpretation of the biblical secrets is partial, veiled and apparently conditioned by the exilic situation. These are the reasons why they should be supplemented by kabbalistic types of exegesis as understood by him. We may assume that this combination of the allegorical and the linguistic exegeses, arranged hierarchically, may reveal the self-consciousness of Abulafia that he offers the peak of a religious development because, inter alia, his exegetical system is the more complex and therefore, so I assume, he would regard it as more perfect.

Maimonides himself has chosen the way of exclusion by deliberately marginalizing some forms of Jewish tradition and some sorts of ancient and medieval philosophies which were not consonant with his philosophical outlook; synthesis. The synthetic approach is one of the major, though not explicit, strategies in Maimonides' spiritual endeavour, but it worked just in one direction: by selecting some types of Jewish views, and some forms of philosophical thought, namely the medieval Neoaristotelianism, he was able to offer a Jewish theology, which was quite novel in Judaism. Nahmanides was also exclusive in his approach: quite critical, though only rarely mentioning names, toward the allegorical exegesis and philosophical intellectualism, he is much more in concert with those forms of thought found in some of the Jewish philosophers who preceded Maimonides, like Yehudah ha-Levi or Abraham bar Hiyya, for example. He was more open toward magic and had a positive view of the perception of Hebrew as a natural language. Maimonides' stand on this issue consists, however, in weakening the importance of the sacred language by attenuating its special status; in associating his noetics with Al-Farabi's sceptical approach versus the view, latter accepted by Averroes as to the union of the human with the divine intellect, and by describing prophecy as part of the glorious past, have been overcome by his Kabbalistic interpreter, who attempted to attribute views carefully obliterated by Maimonides, as the secret stands of the *Guide*.

In his more complex synthesis, Abulafia has built up one of the possible spiritual worlds at the beginning of the last third of the thirteenth century: on the one hand, the combination of Maimonides' Neoaristotelianism version of Judaism with the contemporary Jewish interest in Averroism, which became integral to the Jewish philosophy in Provence and Italy, and on the other hand the arrival of Ashkenazi esoteric traditions from southern Germany to Spain, more precisely to Barcelona, and to Italy. His inclusive approach exploited forms of thought and spirituality that were in his generation in conflict, but he attempted to build up a concert out of

99. IDEL, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* [note 59 above], p. 85-101. In one of this later works, Abulafia is quite aware of the divergences between Nahmanides and Maimonides, and prefers the Maimonides' view. See *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, Ms. Milano-Ambrosiana 53, f. 179b.

these non-harmonious sounds. In other words, Abulafia's special type of Kabbalah represents a unique case where the Maimonidean and Nahmanidean esotericism have been combined; no doubt this is one of the earliest, if not the earliest juxtaposition between the figures, but unlike most of the numerous later comparisons between the two, the views of these figures, as understood by Abulafia, have been combined; in this combination, however, both forms of esotericism suffered drastic changes, which obliterated major inhibitions of these two authors. The uniqueness of this synthesis is unparalleled by Spanish Kabbalah, or by any forms of Kabbalah later. It is an attempt to exploit the strong elements in the two systems and offer a third one, which would capitalize on the authority and insights of all the major thirteenth century masters known to Abulafia, including the Hasidei Ashkenaz. To all these components which inspired Abulafia's synthesis, we have to add the idiosyncratic personality of Abulafia: open enough to learn various kinds of intellectual developments and innovative enough in order to combine them, coupled also by a personal investment in some of the topics he studied, which transformed those heterogenous traditions into a practical system. Incongruent as Abulafia's synthesis is, it should be judged by the main criterion he would like to be judged: if it could inspire an interest in the ecstatic experience he attempted to promote. His commentaries on the *Guide* have been one of the main tools for such a promotion.

The move toward a more synthetic, global or inclusive approach to the spiritual modes found in the variety of approaches presented in the Jewish tradition is, however, not unique to Abulafia: some of his contemporary Kabbalists in Castille, more eminently his former student R. Joseph Gikatilla, have also opened themselves to a variety of intellectual trends, contributing to what I conceive to be a real renaissance of Kabbalah in the form of an innovative approach to the very concept of Kabbalah and a luxuriant Kabbalistic literature¹⁰⁰. One of the more obvious symptoms of this more creative type of Kabbalah is the phenomenon of returning to the same literary genre more than once by the same Kabbalist. Just as Abulafia has written three versions of commentary on the thirty-six secrets of the *Guide*, and three commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah*, so also did Gikatilla, Moses de Leon and Joseph of Hamadan wrote three versions of their commentaries of *Ten Sefirot*¹⁰¹, and the *Zohar* has composed several versions of the «*Idra*»¹⁰².

As in the case of the Castilian Kabbalah, so also in that of the Abulafian one, what is important from a scholarly point of view is not only to find out the systemic consistency, but to explore also the variety of sources which nourished the Kab-

100. IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 210-218. On Abulafia's influence on this major Kabbalist see Abulafia himself, in an important autobiographical piece, analyzed inter alia in IDEL, «*Transmission*», [note 53 above]; for the earlier literary career of Gikatilla, including in particular his contact with Abulafia see Gottlieb, *Mehqarim* [note 51 above], p. 102-105 and for the Gikatilla's thought see my introduction to *Gates of Light, Sha'arei 'Orah*, tr. A. Weinstein, HarperCollins Publishers, 1994, p. XXVII-XXIX.

101. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 211.

102. Yehuda LIEBES, «*The Messiah of the Zohar*», *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, Jerusalem, Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, 1990, p. 101 [Hebrew].

balistic writings, the manner they were combined, the problems inherent of any significant synthesis between substantially different forms of thought¹⁰³. The search for ultimate coherence, so visible in the modern scholarship of Kabbalah, should be only a preliminary effort, which should not be imposed on thinkers whose main interest was less a well organized philosophical system, but an expression of, and sometimes also a directive toward a more experiential mystical path. As we shall see below, however, to those interpretations of the *Guide* in Abulafia's books, some followers of his have contributed more radical ones.

Let me attempt to summarize one major development in the interpretation of Maimonides' *Guide*: most of the extant commentaries on the *Guide* written by Jewish philosophers follow the main lines as proposed by the author. They, together with R. Shmuel and Moshe ibn Tibbon, R. Ya' aqov Anatoli or R. Hillel of Verona, may be described as the scholastic approach to Maimonides, namely those who accepted the framework of the Maimonidean thought, even if on some points they dissented from it. However, Maimonides special strategy of esotericism has generated a complex situation: his emphasis upon the secrecy and upon the fact that he did not disclose his secrets encouraged some comentators to project their own secrets, or what they have received from others that were Maimonides' secrets, into the *Guide*. Abulafia found in the *Guide* hints, as we have seen above, at combinations of letters¹⁰⁴. However, though implicitly viewing the *Guide* as book which is consonant with Kabbalah, he was not ready either to describe Maimonides as a fullfledge Kabbalist, neither to attribute to him other Kabbalistic, spurious writings. Rather, informed by other layers of Jewish esotericism, *Sefer Yetzirah*, Hasidei Ashkenaz and Nahmanides's remarks, Abulafia attempted to offer a comprehensive, and synthetic vision of Jewish esotericism, and read the *Guide* in the light of the other pieces of available esotericism. I propose to designate this approach as perspectivism, since it applies to Maimonides some perspectives which were not totally imposed onto the interpreted material.

Some anonymous authors, however, attributed to Maimonides even talismanic and astrological views¹⁰⁵. Even when those views stand in diametrical opposition to the more philosophical stands of the *Guide* someone could claim that the attributed views are part of the secret stand of the great eagle. Furthermore, the fact that Maimonides attacked some views, related to the linguistic and magical aspects

103. On this issue see M. IDEL, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, Albany, Suny Press, 1995, p. 45-145 as well as my introduction to Daniel ABRAMS (ed.), of *The Book Bahir* Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 1994, p. 1-6, [Hebrew].

104. See § VI above.

105. See the spurious epistle printed under the name *Megillat Setarim* in *Hemdah Genuzah*, Z. EDELMANN (ed.), Koenigsburg, 1856, vol. I, p. 43:

... והם כ"ב אותיות פשוטות ורצה בו כי כל מה שברא

מרוחניות המלאכים אל הנפשות החיצוניות יחקקו באלה הכ"ב מלות

ויהיה לאדם דעה בעולם.

of the already existing Jewish traditions, provoked reactions which attempted, in some cases, to infuse in Maimonides' writings themselves the very views he criticised. This approach, the pseudepigraphical one, is part of the circle very close to the ideas of Abulafia, but should not be identified with him. Unlike Nahmanides and some of his followers rather reserved-while-respectful approach, the pseudepigraphs attempted to integrate Maimonides into their camps. Those four approaches, all part of the thirteenth century Kabbalah, should be well-distinguished from the much more critical attitude found among those who bitterly attacked the *Guide*, or criticised it more moderately.

IX. ABULAFIA'S LIST OF SECRETS OF THE GUIDE

What are the relations between the subject-matters of the *Guide* and the secrets Abulafia ascribes to the *Guide*? As we know, the *Guide's* chapters do not have titles, neither numbers, and Abulafia had to decide what are those subject-matters, according to « our thought »¹⁰⁶. Immediately afterwards, he indicates that he is writing down

« all the secrets found in this book, [namely the *Guide*] just as we have received them from the mouth of the sages of the generation, our masters, may God keep them alive »¹⁰⁷.

This statement is of a certain historical importance: Abulafia claims that he has received the thirty-six secrets from some unidentified masters who are, to his knowledge, still alive in 1280 when *Sitrei Torah* has been composed in Capua. According to another passage, Abulafia has studied in Capua, in his youth the *Guide* with Rabbi Hillel ben Shemuel of Verone. Hillel was still alive in 1280 when Abulafia wrote his commentary¹⁰⁸. However, even if we assume that Hillel is one plausible candidate for being one of Abulafia's alleged sources for the list of secrets, still there seems to be a problem: Abulafia uses a plural form, assuming that there was a group, or several unrelated individuals who passed to him the list, and for the time being, it seems the historical evidence available does not allow us to speculate about the identity of those other masters of Abulafia. However, even if the above statement reflects a real case of transmission, and I am inclined to believe so, this should not be identified with the assumption that it stems from a direct tradition stemming from Maimonides himself. In any case, Abulafia reiterates the same secrets in all the three commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*, a fact that may confirm his claim that he had a fixed tradition regarding the subject-matters and the specific order they should be exposed.

106. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 117a. In Hebrew mahshavtenu.

107. *Ibid.* On the Latin version of this text, see WIRSZUBSKI, *Between the Lines* [note 22 above], p. 146. See also in his *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munchen 408, f. 47a.

108. Hillel died in the nineties of the 13th Century.

In any case, an additional confession of Abulafia seems to emphasize the need to allow the existence of such a group. In his commentary on the *Guide* he claims that he is writing down everything

« from the beginning to the end, [just] as I too have received it from the transmitters, in the form of the heading of the chapters »¹⁰⁹.

The phrase used by Abulafia « min ha-moserim rashei peraqim » is quite interesting; it may well be interpreted as pointing either to a certain group, or to a certain specific form of transmission, which deals with the headings of the chapters, in the spirit of the Talmudic phrase and of Maimonides claims¹¹⁰. Interestingly enough, this Rabbinic expression recurs numerous times in the ecstatic Kabbalah, as we have seen in paragraph IV above, but it would be especially interesting to compare the above confession of Abulafia of receiving the secrets of the *Guide* to that of another ecstatic Kabbalist, about his studying Kabbalah:

« a divine man, a Kabbalist, who taught me the path of Kabbalah by 'heads of chapters'. And, notwithstanding the fact that because of the little I knew from the science of nature it seemed to me to be impossible, my master said to me: 'My son, why do you negate an issue you did not experience? Indeed, it would be worthwhile to experience it' »¹¹¹.

However, such a view is quite rare in other forms of contemporary Kabbalah. So, for example, it is marginal in Nahmanides' school and rather rare among the Castillian Kabbalists. Therefore, it is not a cliché or a topos, found outside of his school, that someone testifies that he received personally a secret tradition.

Another claim regarding a tradition related to the *Guide* is Abulafia's statement that there are 177 chapters in the *Guide*¹¹²:

« There is a tradition in our hand regarding the number of all the chapters included in everyone of the three parts of the book »¹¹³.

Just as in the case of the number of the secrets hidden in the *Guide* also the number of the chapters is conceived to be a tradition and both refer to a certain numerical decoding of a Biblical verse or term. If this numerical, and exegetical approach of Abulafia reflect a previous stand, then we may assume that he has inherited not only a philosophical tradition but also one that has some numerological aspects. Or, in other words, an interpretation of the *Guide* included not only

109. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 163b. See also Abulafia's epistle, *Matzref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, f. 33b, where a more clear statement about disclosing the headings of the chapters is found.

110. See HAGIGAH, f. 13a.

111. *Sefer Sha'arei Tzedeq* (ed.), J. E. PORUSH [Jerusalem, 1989], p. 23.

112. On the whole issue see Raphael JOSPE, « The Number and Division of Chapters in the *Guide of the Perplexed* », in M. IDEL, W.Z. HARVEY, E. SCHWEID (eds.), Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume [Jerusalem, 1988], vol. I, p. 833-887 [Hebrew].

113. *Sitrei Torah*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, ms. 774, f. 115b.

a tradition referring to the philosophical aspects of secrets in the book but also more formal aspects, which have numerical implications.

Though Abulafia also mentions traditions in the context of numerical issues found in his commentaries, I have no doubt that these traditions are part of a post-Maimonidean development, and it is indeed part of a misinterpretation of the *Guide* in the direction of a more linguistic sense. Confronted with the logocentric interpretation of Judaism as offered by Maimonides, the Kabbalists, and more eminently in this particular case Abraham Abulafia, has resorted to a variety of already existing Jewish linguistic traditions, in order to offer another vision of this religion, emphasizing the richness of the realm of language as represented by Hebrew.

X. R. ZERAHIAH'S TESTIMONY AND ITS PARALLELS

In this context, another important issue is to be mentioned: Rabbi Zerachiah ben She'altiel Hen, known also as Gracian, an Aristotelian philosopher born on Barcelona, who left in the early seventies of the thirteenth century for Rome and other places in Italy¹¹⁴ and corresponded with Rabbi Hillel of Verona, has been acquainted with numerical and magical interpretations of the *Guide*. In a letter to R. Hillel, after a brutal attack concerning the latter's « misunderstandings » of the *Guide*, Zerachiah claims that in Maimonides' book

« there are no secrets or enigmas¹¹⁵ from the category of the gematria or of the combination of letters, neither from the category of the names, of the talismans¹¹⁶ and of the amulets, used by the masters of the names¹¹⁷, writers of the amulets, nor of the multiplicity of angels or anything mentioned in *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Sefer Raziel*¹¹⁸ or *Sefer Shiu'ur Qomah*. Everything the Gaon, our Rabbi, blessed be the memory of this righteous, has mentioned from the words of the sages, blessed be their memory, small and great, concerning an issue

114. See RAVITZKY, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom* [note 21 above], p. 212.

115. Hidot.

116. Zurot. This seems to be the best understanding of the text, and this meaning of the word is found in various medieval magical treatises. See e.g. the contemporaneous discussion of R. ABRAHAM of ESQUIRA in his *Sefer Yesod 'Olam*, Ms. Moscow-Guensburg 607, f. 179a [see on this author note 129 below], and the astro-magical text translated and discussed in IDEL, « An Astral-Magical Pneumatic Anthropoid », *Incognita*, vol. II, 1991, p. 9-31.

117. Ba'alei ha-Shemot. ABULAFIA mentions this phrase in an explicit negative context: see his *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah, Philosophie und Kabbala* [note 46 above], p. 22.

See also Maimonides' own negative attitude to the issue of amulets in the *Guide*, I:61.

118. This book is also mentioned in Italy by Abraham ABULAFIA twice see *Sheva' Netivot ha-Torah, ibid.*, p. 21 as part of a list of older magical-mystical texts, and again, p. 2 where he quotes a gematria from this book as part of a tradition. I did not find this gematria in the various extant versions of this book. The second time he refers to divine names he learned from this book. It should however be mentioned that a book with this name had been quoted already by R. Abraham ibn Ezra in the 12th Century and, in the 13th Century, by R. Jacob

related to prophecy, or dealing with the Merkavah or on the account of Creation, [which are] written in the Torah, all are from the category I have mentioned¹¹⁹ or related to their intention. And if someone has some secrets or enigmas or allusions or parables, which are not from the category I have mentioned to you, they are all vain and worthless things »¹²⁰.

This passage is part of a confrontation between universalistic and particularistic trends in Judaism; Maimonides, one of the major figures of the integration of the naturalistic thought as exposed in some trends of Greek and Arabic thought, has provoked both a reaction which negated his naturalization of religion¹²¹ or, as in the case of Abulafia and his possible sources, an attempt to interpret him in a more particularistic manner, by resorting to linguistic topics, as we shall see later on. Nature, which is one of the main concerns for Maimonides has been supplanted to a great extent by language, conceived by the Kabbalists as superior, either as a more powerful means for action, namely magic, or for acceleration the intellectual process, namely ecstasy. R. Zerachiah is no doubt a representative of an intellectual reaction to these two mystico-magical reactions: he sharply criticises Nahmanides' attempt to offer a non-Aristotelian picture of the world¹²² and the Abulafian-like attempts to infuse magical and mystical elements into the secrets of the *Guide*. The above description of the non-naturalistic interpretations of the secrets of the *Guide* include at least two distinct categories: one dealing with gematria and combinations of letters, both of them fitting perfectly Abulafia's approach to the *Guide* and it may, presumably, refer to an ecstatic reading of the *Guide* as exposed in Abulafia's commentaries. The other category, however, dealing with divine names, talismanic figures and amulets, seems to refer to writings different from those of Abulafia, who opposed magic, including linguistic magic¹²³. In any case, no positive attitude to magic, neither a recommendation to use talismans and amulets can be found in Abulafia's writings, even less in his commentaries on the secrets of the *Guide*. These two categories: the ecstatic-combinatory on the one hand, and the magical-talismanic on the other, are not only a plausible distinction between dif-

ben Jacob ha-Kohen in Castile. See IDEL, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics* [note 59 above], p. 152; and, apparently also in this milieu, in a kabbalistic text attributed to R. Meshullam TZARFATI, Meshullam the Frenchman: Oxford, 123, f. 70b-71a; See IDEL, *The Mystical Experience* [note 31 above], p. 105, VERMAN, *The Book of the Contemplation* [note 3 above], p. 205.

119. Namely things related to natural topics.

120. Printed by Raphael KIRCHEIM, *Otzar Nehmad*, vol. 2, Wien, 1857, p. 133. See IDEL, *R. Abraham Abulafia* [note 85 above], p. 40 note 28; RAVITZKY, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom*, p. 155, « Secrets of the *Guide* » [note 41 above], p. 175, where a different translation of this text has been offered.

121. See e.g. Nahmanides' remark that Maimonides restricted the number of miracles and increased the scope of nature, found in his sermon « Torat ha-Shem Temimah », *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, Ch. D. CHAVEL (ed.), Jerusalem, Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1963, vol. I, p. 154.

122. See RAVITZKY, *Al Da'at ha-Maqom*, p. 154; « Secrets of the *Guide* » [note 41 above], p. 174.

123. See IDEL, *R. Abraham Abulafia* [note 85 above], p. 129-133.

ferent approaches, or models of thought and praxis in themselves, but are also corroborated by the syntax of Zerachiah's formulation his critique. The importance of this distinction is even greater since a certain literary piece, attributing an interest in magic and astrology on one hand, and in divine names on another, to Maimonides is available. This is the case in the abovementioned spurious epistle attributed to Maimonides, *Megillat Setarim*, where magical names, talismanic magic and angels are mentioned as if they are found in the *Guide*¹²⁴. This epistle is not dated and I see in the above passage of Zerachiah a plausible evidence for a terminus ante quem for the emergence of some of the ideas included in it. Though this epistle is quite close to Abulafia's thought, I see no reason to attribute it to Abulafia himself, and the possibility that it has been criticized by Zerachiah, helps us dating it in the circle of Abulafia's teacher, apparently in Barcelona, or of his followers, later on in Italy¹²⁵. It should be emphasized that in a manner quite reminiscent of the way we have analysed R. Zerachiah's text as pointing to two different groups, *Megillat Setarim* mentions three types of Kabbalah, the first being the prophetic Kabbalah and the third the « practical Kabbalah »¹²⁶. I see this distinction as similar to respectively the combinatory technique and the talismanic praxis in the above critique of the misunderstanding of the *Guide*. From the above quote from R. Zerachiah's epistle, we may learn that Abulafia has not been the only person in Italy who embraced a mystical approach to the *Guide*, though he may be the source, or one of the sources for such a reading in Italy. This seems to be the case also in another possible reference to mystical reading of the *Guide* found, as pointed out by Ravitzki, in Zerachiah's own *Commentary on the Guide*, where he mentions « many persons, whose mind is polluted by erroneous opinions » in connection to discussions related to the interpretation of the term Ben, son, as hinting at divine names; the affinity between this passage and Abulafia's similar interpretation of the term Ben is quite evident¹²⁷. However, we should again emphasize that R. Zerachiah mentions « many persons », thus allowing the possibility that Abulafia was not alone in his eccentric reading of the *Guide*. Whether the other persons who exposed such a reading are students of Abulafia, or rather earlier authors who had inspired his vision of the *Guide*, as he himself claims in the above quote, is a question that cannot be answered definitively on the basis of the extant material. However, even if such a definitive answer is not in our reach on the basis of the extant material, I am inclined to opt for the latter alternative for the following two reasons:

a) R. Zerachiah's critiques are relatively early, in the life time of Abulafia, and I wonder if we can document repercussions of his interpretations among students, though such students he had in the very town he started to study the *Guide*, Capua, near Rome. On the other hand, he expressly indicates that the secrets he exposes

124. Printed in Hemdah Genuzah [note 105 above].

125. See Aviezer Ravitzky's forthcoming study on Zerachiah and Barcelona.

126. *Hemdah Genuzah*, p. 45.

127. *Al Da'at ha-Maqom*, p. 154-155.

have been received from several persons. Thus, though we cannot rule out the dissemination of Abulafian interpretations among some younger persons in Italy, to whom Zerahiah would react, it seems more plausible to allow the impact of the thoughts, and may be even writings, which served as the sources for Abulafia himself.

b) The talismanic reading of the *Guide* implied in the term *tzurah* that occurs in Zerahiah's quote is met by the spurious epistle, where the term *ruhaniyyut*, a crucial term for the talismanic magic, occurs¹²⁸. Moreover, in some ecstatic Kabbalistic texts written after the death of Abulafia, like in some of the writings of R. Isaac of Acre, the term *ruhaniyyut* recurs time and again¹²⁹. In any case, I am not aware in Spain of a mystical-magical interpretation of the *Guide* and the case that such a reading ushered of before Abulafia seems to me nevertheless quite plausible, for the reasons I would like to propose in the following.

1) Inroads of talismanic terminology in Kabbalah is already evident in the sixties of the 13th century, in the writings of R. Yehudah ben Nissim ibn Malka, though his thought was not influenced by Maimonides, and a magical reading of the *Guide* seems to be implausible in his case¹³⁰. This seems to be the case also insofar other Kabbalists are concerned. R. Bahiya ben Asher, apparently in Barcelona, has resorted to talismanic terms in his commentary on Deut, 18:11¹³¹, and this is the case also in R. Abraham of Esquira, a late 13th century or early 14th century Spanish author of a voluminous Kabbalistic book named *Sefer Yesod 'Olam*, who uses the term *ruhaniyyut*, but again he was, strangely enough, not aware of Maimonides' book¹³². R. Bahiya and R. Abraham of Esquira have not too much in common insofar as their Kabbalistic systems are involved; though both were eclectic authors, their compilations draw upon different kabbalistic sources. Nevertheless, they might have something in common: the latter Kabbalist was acquainted with R. Shem Tov ben Abraham ibn Gaon, while this Kabbalist was part of the same circle of Kabbalist which was cultivated, at least for a considerable period by R. Bahiya, namely the circle of Kabbalists in Barcelona. So far, such a nexus may be non-consequential; however, it is R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon who mentions, for the first time, a Kabbalistic vision of Maimonides, and even mentions that he has seen in Spain an epistle of « Maimonides », where he is depicted in terms, strongly reminiscent of the Heikhalot literature. In his *Migdal 'Oz*, a commentary

128. See the texts mentioned in the following notes.

129. See, e.g. IDEL, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, p. 340, note 60.

130. See Georges VAJDA, *Juda ben Nissim ibn Malka, philosophe juif marocain*, Larose, Paris, 1954; Moshe IDEL, « The Beginning of Kabbala in North Africa? — A Forgotten Document by R. Yehuda ben Nissim ibn Malka », *Pe'amim*, vol. 43, 1990, p. 4-15 [Hebrew].

131. See IDEL, « The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance », *Essential Essays on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and baroque Italy*, David RUDERMAN (ed.), New York, New York University Press, 1992, p. 155, note 68.

132. Ms. Moscow-Gunzburg, 607, f. 179a, 104a. On this author and his work see David de GUNZBURG, « La Cabale à la veille de l'apparition du Zohar » *ha-Qedem*, vol. I (1907), p. 28-36, 111-121; see especially p. 30.

on Maimonides' *Hilekhot Yesodei Torah*, ch. I he writes that he has seen in Sefarad, on a very old parchment, qelaf yashan me'ushan, an epistle that starts with the following sentence:

« I, Moses, the son of Maimon, when I had descended to the chambers of the Merkavah, have understood the issue of the end etc., and his words were similar to the words of the true Kabbalists, which were alluded by our great Rabbi, Ramban, blessed be his memory, at the beginning of the commentary on the Torah ».

This passage has been written around 1320 in the Galilee, probably in Safed and it refers to something R. Shem Tov has seen already in Sefarad, a term which is quite ambiguous from the geographical point of view. We may assume, but this is not quite sure, that it may point to Castile, where this author was in his youth for a while, to study Kabbalah with R. Moshe of Burgos. This would mean that the fabrication of the document, described as written upon an old parchment, must have been done not later than the early eighties of the 13th century. If so, I wonder whether Scholem's assumption regarding the nexus between the second controversy around the *Guide*, which has presumably have inspired the composition of this forgery¹³³. However, the truncated form of the quote, short as it is, may nevertheless help us understand better the background of the forgeries. When mentioning the similarity between the content of the epistle and the words of Nahmanides at the beginning of his commentary on the Torah, R. Shem Tov apparently refers to Nahmanides' preface to his commentary. There he mentions only once words of Kabbalists, namely the statement about the Torah as the continuum of Divine Names. I suppose, following Scholem's suggestion to this effect, that this particular view of Nahmanides' has been compared by Shem Tov to the lost spurious epistle¹³⁴. Moreover, again as Scholem has suggested, the phrase « I have descended to the chambers of the Merkavah » may reflect a certain reverberation of an expression he found only in R. Ezra *Commentary on the Talmudic 'Aggadol'*¹³⁵.

Moreover, as the same kabbalists put it elsewhere in his commentary on Maimonides' *Code of the Law*¹³⁶, Maimonides has offered rationales for the commandments from his own reason, an approach that astonished the Kabbalist, who claims that something like that should not be done, especially by someone « who has received the secrets, orally from a person to another ». This conception of transmission of secret may also reflect the view of Nahmanides, which again, has been projected onto Maimonides¹³⁷.

The time of the forgery of the epistle quoted by R. Shem Tov would be not earlier than the beginning of the seventies, when Nahmanides' commentary on the Bible was already circulating. Thus, it would be safer to conjecture that the Kab-

133. « Mi-Hoqer li-Mequbbal » [note 5 above], p. 92-93.

134. *Ibid.*, p. 93; IDEL, « Maimonides and Kabbalah », p. 74 note 158.

135. SCHOLEM, *ibid.*, p. 93.

136. See *Hilkhot Tefillin*, III:5.

137. See IDEL, « We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition » [note 98 above], p. 51-73.

balistic interpretation of Maimonides was undertaken early in the seventies of the 13th century Catalunya, a presupposition that coincides with the time Abraham Abulafia started his Kabbalistic career in the same region. Both Abulafia, as we have described him above, and the anonymous forger of the epistle, have combined Maimonides with Nahmanides' type of discussions.

It should be emphasized that like Abulafia's claim that he was revealed the time of the end also the anonymous forger has attributed to Maimonides a knowledge of the time of the end. The preoccupation with an eschatological topics fits perfectly one of Abulafia's sentences, where he declared, in a letter sent to Barcelona at the end of the eighties, that God has announced to him « the time of the end of the exile and the beginning of the redemption »¹³⁸. If Scholem's two conjectures that related the epistle to Geronese material are correct, as well as my two suggestions related to another Geronese linkage and one related to Abulafia, then the locale for the fabrication would be rather Catalunya than Castile, though the possibility of a Castilian locale for the fabrication may be strengthened by a series of pseudo-epigraphical writings that emerged from this region, including the most famous Kabbalistic book, the Zohar. However, also the circle of writings designated in scholarship as the « Contemplation Circle », produced pseudepigraphies attributed to late antiquity Jewish figures. However, it should be emphasized that in our case, the attribution to Maimonides is not a regular case of projecting own's ideas on an ancient figure, whose views are rather vague and fragmentary, in search for authorizing own kabbalistic innovations, but on the contrary, the conversion of a famous and strong opponent to some views into their advocate. An additional observation regarding forgery in the Castile region is however, related to the early 13th century Kabbalist R. Yehudah ben Yaqar and also to Nahmanides, as we may learn from some statements of R. Moshe ben Shimeon of Burgos, also he was an acquaintance with Abulafia¹³⁹. Interestingly enough, this Moses of Burgos was one of the earliest teachers of R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon in matters of Kabbalah. However, even if the Castilian circles of Kabbalists would be one possible candidates for the forgery of the epistle quoted by Shem Tov, I doubt whether this may be the case with the epistle which portrays Maimonides as a magician. Again, the time of the forgery of the epistle quoted by R. Shem Tov would be not earlier than the beginning of the seventies, when Nahmanides' commentary on the Bible was already circulating. Thus, it would be safer to conjecture that the Kabbalistic interpretation of Maimonides was undertaken early in the seventies of the 13th century Catalunya, a presupposition that coincides with the time Abraham Abulafia started his Kabbalistic career in the same region. Both Abulafia and the anonymous forger of the epistle combined Maimonides with Nahmanides' type of discussions. On the other hand, Abulafia testifies that he started to study Kabbalah in Barcelona, the very place where R. Shem Tov has also learned a great part of his Kabbalistic

138. *Ve-Zo't li-Yhudah*, [note 60 above], p. 18.

139. *Ibid.*, « Maimonides and Kabbalah », p. 61.

knowledge¹⁴⁰. Moreover, even if we assume that Abulafia might not receive the oral traditions about the secrets of the *Guide* in this city, he nonetheless claims that he has taught the *Guide* there to two persons, R. Yehudah Salmon and a certain R. Qalonimus¹⁴¹. Also R. Isaac of Acre, who uses the talismanic terminology, was for a while in this city. Moreover, he is one of the few Kabbalists who was acquainted with the mystico-magical views of R. Yehudah ibn Malka, though we do not know whether this knowledge was acquired in Barcelona. And, indeed, another Kabbalist, R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, who states that the *Guide* should be understood in accordance to oral tradition, in a manner reminiscent of Abulafia's claim was, apparently an inhabitant of Barcelona. He speaks about « these attributes necessitate an interpretation received from mouth to mouth. »¹⁴²

Last, but not least, R. Zerahiah ben She'altiel Hen come to Italy from Barcelona, and this fact could account for some of the descriptions of the misinterpretations of the *Guide* found in this city¹⁴³. Are these recurrences of Barcelona mere coincidences? This is possible and I am not sure that we must push too far the circumstantial point we have collected above. However, in absence of any alternative explanation as to the milieu which could produce the anonymous *Megillat Setarim* that was printed by Edelman, I would like to suggest that it was in this city, or its near vicinity, that a talismanic understanding of the *Guide*, and of ecstatic Kabbalah in general has emerged. In any case, this spurious epistle represents, or at least reflects, a relatively earlier fabrication of a talismanic approach attributed to Maimonides, of which Abulafia either was not aware or, if aware, he has rejected it.

XI. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me attempt to summarize Abulafia's attitude to the *Guide* as emerging from the above discussions: he was not eager, like Gikatilla was, to sharply and openly criticise Maimonides' stand on language, even though it dramatically undermines his own approach. On the other hand, he also was reticent of transforming Maimonides into a fullfledged Kabbalist, by openly attributing to him his own Kabbalistic stands, and even less to take the road of the anonymous writers who transformed Maimonides into a repentant philosopher who become a Kabbalist or finally even less into a Kabbalistic magician, a view that would contradict his own stands. Thus, from some points of view, Abulafia may be regarded as a moderate politician acting in a rather very loaded minefields of speculative interests and bizarre transformations of ideas and figures achieved by means of personal transition from one

140. On Abulafia's studies there see Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash III*, p. XLII-XLIII; on Shem Tov's study with the Rashba see the several references spread all over his Kabbalistic extant writings.

141. JELLINEK, *ibid.*, p. XLI.

142. *Commentary of Sefer Yetzirah*, ed. Jerusalem, 1961, f. 55cd. 1

143. See note 125 above.

intellectual and spiritual system to another, and by pseudepigraphical attributions, which were supposed to « alligne » the opponent to adhere to own's tenets. His attempts to keep open as many allegiances, sometimes weak, as possible, as long as he was not attacked and criticised. He preferred to make strong moves in matters of intellectual syntheses without, however, using too strong a rhetoric. Apparently, he was much more concerned in what seemed to be his major task: to advance the propagation of his ecstatic Kabbalah without provoking too much controversy.

This strategy did not succeed: after few years of quiete vagancy on the Northern coast of the Mediterranean, he was arrested in 1279 in Trani, Italy, and apparently this arrest was instigated by Jews, later on he was arrested in Rome by the Minorites. Some years later, sometime in the late eighties, his prophetic and messianic claims, and more implicitly also his understanding of the Jewish texts, encountered a bitter opposition from the side of the Rashba, a Kabbalist himself, a case that demonstrates how complex the late 13th Century Jewish religious scene was. So, we may assume that the Rashba has intended also to any of his three commentaries on the *Guide* when he labelled Abulafia's writings as interpreting « the scriptures and the words of the sages [by means of] gematria »¹⁴⁴. His Kabbalistic interpretation of the *Guide* has been assaulted, again by a Kabbalist, at the end of the 15th Century¹⁴⁵. The Spanish Kabbalah, which started to crystalize in more particularistic and centralistic moulds already at the end of the 13th century, and culminated this process a the end of the 15th Century, attempted to establish its own domain as a full alternative to philosophy. Abulafia's synthesis, as presented in his commentaries on the *Guide*, nevertheless survived especially outside Spain, in numerous manuscripts which may compete, at least from the statistical point of view with most of the philosophical commentaries. It is the selective grid of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' scholars that has contributed to some of the inhibitions of the printers since the Renaissance, that contributed to the neglection of a whole range of mystical interpretations offered by Jewish thinkers to the *Guide*. Inspired mainly by the search for the authentic, though very oftenly, elusive and esoteric views of the *Guide*, the Maimonidean scholars relegated the study of the role played by his book in the more mystical circles, to the scholars of mysticism. They, at their turn, would conceive, as I have pointed out above, this part of cultural studies, as dealing with too philosophical an issue. Caught between the two too puristic approaches, Abulafia's three commentaries of the *Guide* have remained in the shadow of both the study of Jewish philosophy and mysticism.

Moshe IDEL

144. See Ibn Adret's responsum, vol. I, n. 548.

145. See R. YEHUDAH HAYAT, *Sefer Minhag Yehudah*, printed in *Sefer Ma'arekhet ha'Elohut*, Mantua, 1558, f. 3b. On the background of this critique see M. IDEL, « The Encounters between the Spanish and Italian Kabbalah after the Expulsion from Spain » [Forthcoming].